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ABSTRACT

Thirteen alternatives to using competency based tests should be considered when diagnosing student competency in writing: teacher-made or departmental tests, teacher-student conferences, contractual grade agreements between student and teacher, student self-evaluation, individualized goal setting, keeping files or portfolios of student work, teachers' written comments on student papers, rating scales, diagnosing student growth in their handling of syntactic structures, peer criticism (workshop approach), collaborative learning (students teaching one another in mutual-interest groups), staff grading/cross grading (groups of teachers grade the same papers), and games/contests. Since English is too complex a subject to be measured by a single test, teachers can get a more accurate and fairer evaluation of student writing skills by using many kinds of evaluation methods. (RL)

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COMPETENCY-BASED TESTS: WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?

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Competency-Based Tests: What are the Alternatives?

One educator has said that minimum competency testing is now the vogue, and he is probably correct. Two years ago only two states required minimum competency testing; however, today more than thirty-four states have taken action to make some form of minimum competency testing in basic skills mandatory in their educational programs.[1] This action has resulted from the public's demand that students demonstrate minimum proficiency in basic subjects before being eligible for promotion or graduation. Although these demands have been fortified by the dissatisfaction of the public with the large number of high school graduates who can barely read or write, the decline in students' scores on the verbal section of the Scholastic Aptitude Tests, and the desire of educational systems to have some type of accountability system,[2] English teachers are concerned about these testing programs, especially when they are designed to measure the writing ability of students based upon their test performance.

In the first place, English teachers are concerned about the criteria used in choosing these tests and the methods used in scoring them. Knowing from experience, they agree with William A. Jenkins, who points out in "Elementary School Language Tests,"[3] that some abilities, especially those in the affective domain, cannot be measured by paper and pencil tests; yet, they are recognized by every good teacher as indications of student growth in writing skills-- the sudden voluntary desire to revise a paper several times without requesting a grade change, or a new interest in sentence styling. Secondly, because teachers care about the preservation and development of each student's sense of worth, they are concerned about the use of scores made on these tests, hoping that they will not be used for the formation of policies for tracking students into groups

or courses of study.[4] Moreover, teachers feel that the authority for assessing a student's progress in a course has been taken away from them and given to an external agent, the legislature or school board. Finally, they question the validity and reliability of tests designed to measure students' abilities to handle English well, when such tests can treat only a small portion of what those students have learned in their English classes (p. 32).

The National Council of Teachers of English Task Force on Measurement and Evaluation in the Study of English also speaks of the scope of English, observing that because English is a subject of many parts, only many kinds of evaluative instruments can ever begin to measure student progress in it.[5] The study emphasizes that the testing of a student's knowledge of usage, grammar, literature, or writing provides one with only a small perception of how that student has grown (pp. 26-28). Competency based tests in writing are no exceptions. They are merely another instrument that may indicate how students have progressed in specific areas of writing, but the limitations posed upon the testing environment interferes with the accuracy of these measurements (pp. 12-15). In the first place, the entire test activity is rigidly controlled. The students are generally required to write on topics about which they may have little knowledge of or interest in. Nevertheless, each one has to make a selection and develop an essay within a set time with little opportunity for proofreading or revision.

Yet these same students have been taught to consider the writing process to be as important as the finished product. As a result, they have been encouraged to think about their topics, talk about them in class, then make a selection, and write, with encouragment, to rewrite again and again. Therefore, the timed essay of the competency based test works against those students who cannot shift

abruptly from the pace of the classroom to that of the test. Their test performance will not be an accurate demonstration of their writing ability.

Moreover, competency-based tests are culturally biased.[6] They are written in standard English and require that all students adhere to the conventional concepts and usages of standard English. Consequently, they penalize those black students whose teachers held a flexible attitude toward dialects and other students to whom English is a second language.

Because the main purpose of student evaluation is to help students to learn better and to assist teachers in selecting the most appropriate learning activities for each student, there should be many tools, procedures, and methods for accomplishing these purposes. Competency-based tests in writing are only one tool among many designed to measure students' proficiencies. It would be unwise, therefore, for anyone to use any single system, process, or instrument for making decisions about a student's learning potential or progress in an area as personal as writing.[7] Moreover, the intended purpose of these tests can be accomplished through a variety of alternatives to competency-based tests -- alternatives that will provide students with fair and ample opportunities to demonstrate their writing abilities. This paper will present thirteen such alternatives that teachers may use to diagnose student competency in writing.

The teacher-made or the departmental tests are an alternative to competency-based tests.[8] These tests, designed by teachers who work with students in their writing assignments, are geared to evaluate student performance on the basis of previously established standards. They will, therefore, relate to the objectives of the course, and define what the teacher will or will not accept as an indication of attainment of these objectives. Since they can be tailored to specific

situations and individual needs, they are beneficial to both students and teachers. They can indicate how well a student is progressing in relation to classroom objectives; they can determine where a student's strengths or weaknesses lie, and they can assist in identifying those students who need specialized help and the areas in which help is needed (pp. 33-34). Because most teachers grade their tests soon after administering them, the students can profit from the test review and the immediate teacher feedback.

A second alternative to testing is the interview or teacher-student conference (p. 27). Because these conferences are generally private, they provide teachers with insight into each student's approach to writing, knowledge which the teacher may use to plan instructions to meet the students' needs. Both methods also give the teacher an opportunity to use previous writing assignments as a basis for discussion. Through these discussions the teacher can learn what causes the students to write as they do. Then by working with each student, individually and in groups, the teacher is able to determine how well each student is moving toward the goals of the course.

Lague and Sherwood in A Laboratory Approach to Writing go a step further, recommending that teachers hold short interviews in their classrooms during regular class time.[9] They suggest that while students are writing in groups, the teacher confer with individual students for a few minutes. Using this procedure, the teacher can talk personally to each student at least once a week, during the composing process, and note that student's growth.

Contractual grade agreements between the students and the teacher are a third alternative.[10] To form a contract, the teacher and student agree on which course objectives the student will fulfill and what service or support the teacher will

provide. For instance, the student may contract to keep a journal, write four expository essays, and read two novels during the first 9 weeks of the semester for a pre-determined mid-term grade. As the student works toward the established goal, the teacher keeps records of the student's efforts, noting also how they relate to the specified objectives and contract commitment (pp. 19-21).

Self-evaluation is still another alternative to be used for judging student growth in writing.[11] The teacher may hand out to students a list of priorities in writing, or both teacher and student may work up a list of writing criteria. The student then writes and checks the material against the established checklist. This method of evaluation not only helps students to assume responsibility for their writing development but also to control their writing behavior. As students become aware of what needs revision and how to go about making that revision, they learn how to become their own editors, and indication that they are learning to write (pp. 72-82).

Closely akin to self-evaluation is individualized goal setting, a fifth alternative to testing.[12] Using this method, the teacher looks at the student's writing and sets writing goals or objectives to be accomplised based upon the student's weaknesses or strengths. In "Goal Setting and Evaluation," Mary H. Beaven states that a goal may be as specific as "Spell tomorrow, occasion, and recommend correctly from how on" or as general as "Develop your own voice; your writing should sound if you and no one else were writing (p. 141). She states that the process of individualized goal setting works best at the beginning of the school year when student and teacher are new to each other, because it will provide an opportunity for a teacher to become acquainted with the students and develop a climate of trust (pp. 138-140). Goal setting is also very meaningful

for those students who feel unsure of their knowledge or ability and as a result require more help or encouragement before they will experiment with different types of writing. By limiting attention to a few goals at a time, the student has an opportunity to concentrate on their mastery before undertaking new ones and the comfort of knowing that the writing will be evaluated in the light of the specific goals for that assignment only.

The NCTE Task Force in its study also recommends the keeping of files or portfolios of student work as another alternative to testing, a sixth.[13] Because these folders contain material representing the student's weekly and monthly writing performances, they present an accurate record of the progress the student has made in the course.

Another adequate and traditional measure of student writing achievement is the teacher's written comments on students' papers or the teacher's assessment or grading of written assignments, a seventh alternative.[14] Because teachers have to read and grade numerous papers, most of them can immediately tell a good paper from a weak one. Some teachers may use a single letter to designate the quality of the entire paper. Others may use three grades (pp. 11-13): one for the content, another for the organization, and the third for the mechanics. Regardless of the method, the comments are indicative of the teacher's assessment of the students' performance.

Teachers use many methods for grading students' papers in order to evaluate growth in writing. Robert L. Wilson in "The Effects of First and Secondhand Sensory Experiences on Student Perception as Measured in Written Composition" observes that although English teachers have attempted to teach writing for decades, they still have not agreed on criteria that they feel are valid measures of good writing.[15] He also points out that John C. Follman and James S. Anderson in "An Investigation of the Reliability of Five Procedures for Grading English Themes," reached the con-

clusion that the Everyman's Scale (a scale in which raters are instructed to use their own judgment in rating a set of themes) has an unusually high record of being reliable and fair (p. 46).

Some teachers, however, prefer to use rating scales, an eighth alternative, which spell out the criteria to students, and therefore, provide for greater grade uniformity among the faculty. Paul Diederich has designed a rating scale that describes the low, middle, and high qualities for a piece of expository writing.[16] His scale helps teachers to assess both the quality of ideas and style, and the amount of "correctness" in a piece of writing. His scale conists of two factors

I. General Merit which includes

   A. Quality and development of ideas
   B. Organization
   C. Style or individuality
   D. Wording and phrasing

II. Mechanics which include

   A. Grammar
   B. Sentence Structure
   C. Punctuation & Capitalization
   D. Spelling

Student performance on each section under General Merits may be scored from 2 to 5 points and under Mechanics, from 1 to 5 points. The teachers determine the letter grade to be assigned. Whenever teachers differ by a full letter grade on a paper, a third reader who does not know what grades the paper had previously received, reviews and grades it. This grade is substituted for whichever grade is farther from it, and the lower grade is discarded.

Teachers may also note student's progress in writing by diagnosing the students' growth in handling syntactic structures, a ninth alternative. Sara W. Lundsteen

recommends that teachers use the Hunt's T-unit scale.[17] This method provides a quantitative measurement of a student's maturity in generating sentences by discovering how often a student uses subordination and other forms of modifications. To measure this growth, the teacher divides several pieces of student writing into the smallest possible units called T-units, including all modifiers, and then counts the number of words in each of these units. Students display growth in syntactic fluency when they use more words and sentence modification per sentence in their writings as the semester progresses.

A tenth alternative to competency-based tests is to use the Writers' Workshop as a means of peer criticism. Thom Hawkins in "Group Techniques for Teaching Writing" discusses some ways students in study groups may help each other to write better.[18] Once a week, any three or four writers can pair up with their essays, choosing one of the essays to treat in detail. With the author the students will talk about the positive and negative aspects of this paper. Then they will give the author a written copy of their criticism. The author can then either revise the original copy, taking into consideration the suggestions of his peers, or write another essay on a different topic. If the student revises the paper, this paper is submitted to the teacher along with all peer comments for evaluation. This process permits the student to get a measurement in three ways: the peer comments in the margins, the conversations of the peers, and the remarks of the instructor. Moreover, it enables the teacher to see how the students criticize a work that they are not so subjectively involved in and as a result demonstrate how well they too understand the writing process.

Very closely akin to the Writers' Workshop is collaborative learning, an eleventh alternative. Kenneth Bruffee in "Collaborative Learning: Some Practice Models ", states that the purpose of collaborative learning is to organize the

class members to teach one another in learning, and to create coherence and mutual interest among the members of the class.[19] Bruffee maintains that students can learn with and from other students for several reasons. First, as each student helps another, both learn more about the aspect of writing being discussed. Secondly, because they become participants in the process, they gain an active knowledge of what they had known passively before. Third, when students help one another to learn to write, they become good listeners and becoming good listeners is beneficial to them as writers because as they begin to develop an ear for the language, they become more aware of the writing criteria that they already knew, and are being taught. Moreover, as students become more demanding of one another's work, they also become more critical of their own (pp. 636-40).

Lague and Sherwood in A Laboratory Approach also recommend peer criticism. They observe that as students work with others on their papers, they see that which is not clear to them is also not clear to others. As they learn their strengths and become resource persons for their peers, they develop pride in self which leads to an improvement and confidence in their writing.[20]

Ken Macrorie in Telling Writing states that one of the best ways to build standards is to have beginning writers engage in critical sessions with their peers.[21] After having participated in months of such sessions, each writer will develop a taste or judgment for making distinctions between clarity or the lack of it in classmates' papers, while along each one will inadverently become more critical of his own writings (pp. 67-68).

The focus on peer editing or grading is not new. In 1950, S. I. Hayakawa in "Linguistic Science and the Teacher of Composition" recommends that students in Freshman English write, not for the teacher but for each other.[22] He further notes that the merits of a theme should be judged by

the teacher, but by fellowmates with the teacher serving only as coordinator.

A twelfth alternative to competency-based tests for evaluating student proficiency in writing is to use staff or cross grading.[23] This procedure may be carried out by having any two teachers exchange and grade each other's papers. However, Paul Diederich in Measuring Growth in English recommends that at least four teachers be involved in evaluating a student's papers, in order to provide a reliable score (pp. 48-50). To obtain this score all students in a class should write two papers on the same topic at different times on the same day. These papers will be graded by two different pairs of teachers. The student papers should be identified by I. D. numbers or symbols and distributed randomly among the staff, who will evaluate them for writing competency based upon a common checklist or rating scale which both students and teachers know about and understand.

Finally, games and contests provide a thirteenth alternative to diagnosing student competency in writing.[24] Teachers can use a number of classroom activities that lend themselves not only to a "fun and game" experience but also provide a teaching and evaluative tool for the instructor. For instance, there can be creative writing programs or contests. Those students who enter works would be concerned about the works meeting the requirements of that activity. Their teacher would be concerned about the extent to which their entries met the writing skills for which the activity was designed. There may also be writing games held within the class period. The student can hold contests to see who can write the best paragraphs centered around a "Quotable Quote" or who can write the best "Campus Comedy" essay. Teachers may also use word games to note students' recognition of word relationships and vocabulary development. Scrabble and Crossword puzzles are helpful in this instance. Crossword puzzles are inexpensive and as close by as yesterday's local newspaper.

English is too complex a subject for one to believe that a single test could ever adequately form a basis for judging a student's growth in or knowledge of it. Moreover, a student's ability to write well depends largely upon the writing environment--the teacher's attitude, the topic, the classroom climate, and the amount of writing done. Evaluation exists not alone, but as an integral part of ones beliefs about the learning process and growing.

Peter Elbow holds similar views. Referring to writing as an organic, developmental process that involves stages of growth, plateaus, and breakthroughs, he states that the breakthroughs are the best evidence of student growth in writing because they indicate change; revealing how the students have found a way to work through the obstacles that hindered a particular writing process.[25] Such stages or changes indicate growth (pp. 73-74). However, they are not always revealed by competency tests even though they are apparent to the teacher and the student. Consequently, those persons interested in diagnosing the writing ability of a student will have to look at a number of pieces of that student's writing performed under varying situations. Dr. Herman B. Smith, Jr., Chancellor, University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff often says, "The potential of students should never be underestimated; rather it should be discovered, nurtured, and developed."[26] Any student's ability to demonstrate growth in writing is certainly a potential that deserves this type of consideration. Through using many kinds of evaluative instruments, teachers can provide all students with an opportunity to display their real growth in writing skills.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Marc Leepson, "Competency Testing," Editorial Research Report, 2, No. 7 (Aug. 1978), p. 2.

[2]"Minimal Competencies and Measures of Competencies," Slade, 2, No. 2 (Dec. 1976), p. 1.

[3]Reviews of Selected Published Tests in English, ed. Alfred H. Grommon, NCTE (1976), p. 52.

[4]Alfred H. Grommon, "Statewide Accountability Program of Testing and Assessment," Reviews of Selected Published Tests in English NCTE (1976), pp. 29-32.

[5]"Common Sense and Testing," pp. 1-2.

[6]Jenkins, "Elementary School Language Tests," Reviews of Selected Published Tests in English, NCTE, (1976), pp. 53-57.

[7]"Common Sense and Testing," pp. 1-2.

[8]"Alternatives to Standardized Testing," NEA (1977), p. 33.

[9]Carol Feiser Laque and Phyllis A. Sherwood, NCTE (1977), p. 40.

[10]"Alternatives to Standardized Testing," p. 17.

[11]Laque and Sherwood, p. 82.

[12]Mary H. Beaven, "Individualized Goal Setting: Self Evaluation and Peer Evaluation," Evaluating Writing, Charles H. Cooper and Lee Odell, NCTE (1977), pp. 142-43.

[13]"Common Sense and Testing," pp. 9-10.

[14]Joanna McKenzie, "Teachers Talk About Evaluating English," California English Journal 2, No. 4 (Sept. 1971), pp. 8-9.

[15]Robert L. Wilson, Dissertation, Florida State University, 1976, p. 47.

[16]Measuring Growth in English NCTE (1974), pp. 5-10.

[17]"Help for the Teachers of Written Composition," ERIC (1976), pp. 53-56.

[18]NCTE (1976), pp. 28-30.

[19] College English, NCTE, 34, no. 5 (Feb. 1973), pp. 636-40.

[20] NCTE (1977), pp. 29-32.

[21] (New York: Hayden Book Company, 1970), p. 67.

[22] ETC: A Review of General Semantics, 7, (Winter, 1950) pp. 99-103.

[23] Diederich, pp. 48-50.

[24] "Common Sense and the Teaching of English," p. 10.

[25] Peter Elbow, Writing Without Teachers, (New York: Oxford Press, 1973), pp. 22-25.

[26] "Imperatives for Growth," An address presented at the UA-Pine Bluff Fall Academic Convocation, 1976, and Spring Convocation, 1977.